



Survivor Stories

Child Slave to Star Student: Mabel's Story

On Lake Volta in Ghana, child slaves are forced to work day and night on dangerous and deadly fishing boats. Mabel was one of them, trafficked into slavery by her own impoverished family. Today she is free and getting an education. For the first time, she is safe to dream about her future.

'My Name Is Mabel'

When Mabel was a young girl, her mother got sick and died. She was sent to live with relatives. "My grandfather said he can't send us to school because he spent his money to bury our mother," Mabel recalls, "so we have to work to pay the money."

Mabel was forced into child labor slavery on Lake Volta, the biggest man-made reservoir in the world. In this huge expanse of water, storms can easily capsize small fishing boats and kill those aboard. "I feel scared because the lake is very big," Mabel says. "When the wind is blowing, you can just go down, and you will die." Mabel was forced to fold the fishing nets. "They would tell me I must hold the net," she says. "They are going to throw the net, so if they throw the net and then they are coming [back], I should be folding it. If they came and I am not folding it, they will cane me. They will use the paddle to cane me."



Mabel was forced into labor off the boat, too. She was forced to work around the clock. Early in the morning, she was forced to collect wood and cook maize porridge. She was forced to make lunch and dinner for workers on the boats. She was beaten and abused. "If we come back from the lake, they would say I should cook," she says. "If I told them, today I am tired, I can't cook, then they would start beating me and insulting me." Late at night Mabel was forced to go out fishing on the dangerous lake. "I hardly slept at all," Mabel says. "Every evening I hoped that there would be a storm, so I wouldn't have to go out on the lake."

Former Child Slave Helps Rescue Mabel

James Kofi Annan knows exactly what Mabel was suffering. He also grew up as a child slave on the boats of Lake Volta. "I was a child slave in the fishing villages," James says. "Now I am doing everything possible to make sure that no child goes through what I went through as a child slave." As a slavery survivor, James founded Challenging Heights, a front-line organization that has partnered with Free the Slaves to fight for children's rights to education and a life free from forced labor. His team visits local fishing communities to learn about children who might have been sold into slavery. Then they travel to Lake Volta to try to rescue them. This is how they found Mabel.



Mabel's New Life

Mabel was driven to a Challenging Heights safe house in Winneba, a historic fishing port in southern Ghana. Soon she was moved to a school that James founded. Mabel had never set foot in a classroom. In her new life, she is a star pupil. "I like math and social studies," she says. "I had never been to school before, so some words are difficult for me. When I came here, they started teaching me how to write my name, how to pronounce words, and how to read. My favorite thing is the teachers. They like the children, and I like how they teach." When Mabel was rescued, at the age of 15, she could not read or write. "She didn't even know this is a pen or a book," says Linda, a Challenging Heights case worker says. "Mabel has transformed drastically. She now knows her rights. She can now even speak in English. She is doing very well."

Dreams for the Future

In a safe place, Mabel's dreams can finally come true. She has transformed from a helpless child slave into a happy, friendly, confident, strong, and successful young woman. Her positive attitude and determination inspire others. "Mabel's future is bright," Linda says. "She is a very intelligent girl. She's very clever." Mabel has dreams for the future—and she has big plans. "I want to become a nurse," she says. "So I can prove to my family that I can make it in life."

See Mabel's Story

Mabel's remarkable journey from slavery to freedom was made into a mini-documentary, with support from the Discovery Channel, as part of a video series from the [Discovery Learning Alliance](#). The video segments are used in classroom and community settings in Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya to show the importance of education. You can see Mabel's profile video on the [FTS blog](#).